Advocacy research on homophobia in education:

Claims-making, trauma construction and the politics of evidence

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This article is accepted for publication at *Sociology*.

Sociology has an ambivalent relationship with advocacy research because the benefits of participation and engagement must be balanced with concerns about bias. The current study uses ten recent research reports on homophobic bullying in British educational settings, written and funded by campaigning charities, as a case study of contemporary advocacy research. Presenting a sociological analysis of these documents and adopting a social problems approach, claims-making processes in the reports are documented and significant methodological and analytical flaws are identified. Instead of objective research, these reports are campaigning documents that seek to gain media coverage and influence policy. Implications for how the reports should be used as resources for research and social policy are examined, and a more nuanced and sophisticated approach to engaging with advocacy research is called for.

Keywords: advocacy, charities, education, homophobia, LGBT, sexualities, social problems, trauma construction

Homophobia, Schooling and Social Change

While sexuality is often considered a personal characteristic, it is also a form of power through which people are stratified by the stigmatization and policing of sexual desires and practices that do not conform to dominant sexual norms (Weeks, 1985). The prejudice, discrimination and violence levelled at people with same-sex desires has been conceptualised as homophobia. Homophobia can have damaging physical and emotional consequences for sexual minorities, affecting outcomes including school attendance, career progression and psychological well-being (Rivers, 2011). It also impacts upon heterosexuals, restricting behaviours such as emotional intimacy and physical tactility because of their perceived association with homosexuality (Plummer, 1999).

Schools are an important institution in which norms of sexuality are consolidated and reproduced (Ferfolja, 2007). The presence of homophobic language and bullying was exacerbated in the British context by social policy such as Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, repealed in 2003, which prevented the promotion of homosexuality as a 'pretended family relationship' in schools, silenced discussion of sexual minorities and discouraged teachers from dealing with homophobic bullying (Rivers, 2011). Known as heterosexism, this implicit and structural privileging of heterosexuality damaged sexual minority students' school experiences and helped obscure homophobia in school settings.

Yet a key social trend in British society has been improving attitudes toward homosexuality (Weeks, 2007). *British Social Attitudes* survey data demonstrate that after peaking in the late 1980s, a sustained decline in homophobic attitudes has occurred (Clements and Field, 2014). Data from the 2017 survey document a 17-percentage point increase since 2012 to 64 percent of adults who that think same-sex relationships are 'not wrong at all'. Substantial generational differences exist, with younger generations markedly more inclusive, yet there is progressive change across all age cohorts (Swales and Taylor, 2017). Furthermore, homophobic perspectives are no longer enshrined in British law. The introduction of the single Equality Act 2010, adopted by OfSTED in its school inspection guidance, also signalled a shift in social policy regarding homophobic bullying (Rivers, 2011). More inclusive school spaces have emerged, growing numbers of sexual minority youth are coming out at school, and they are increasingly accepted by their peers (Savin-Williams, 2005; White et al., 2018), even as heterosexism persists (McCormack, 2012).

However, while peer-reviewed academic research documents this decrease in homophobia in schools, a report published by the charity Stonewall claimed higher levels of homophobia than academic research has ever found, arguing that homophobia was 'endemic' and 'almost epidemic' in British schools (Hunt and Jensen, 2007). The exceptionally high reported rates of homophobic bullying were a result of method: their definition of homophobic bullying 'stretches from…extreme repeated systematic violence to…overhearing the word 'gay' being used in a pejorative way, being socially excluded and experiencing a sense of being different' (Monk, 2011: 186). Despite this, the Stonewall report and associated campaign garnered considerable attention from the media, policymakers and academics. At the time of writing, the 2007 report has been cited 149 times according to Google Scholar.

The School Report was the precursor to a trend of campaigning charities producing research on homophobia in educational settings. Alongside additional reports by Stonewall in 2012, 2014 and 2017, the National Union of Students (NUS), the Metro charity and Ditch the Label produced similar documents. These reports are funded and written by the respective charities. While academics may be involved at various points, particularly around data collection, the charities retain control over all aspects of the reports and the data are not published in academic journals[1]. The process is distinct from the practice of academics and third-sector organisations co-producing knowledge through participatory action research

(McIntyre, 2008). Instead, the reports constitute a form of advocacy research, defined as ‘empirical investigations of social problems by people who are deeply concerned about those problems’ (Gilbert, 1997: 101), and need to be understood in their social, economic and intellectual context.

Advocacy Research, Policy-Based Evidence and a Shifting Context for Charities

The position of advocacy research within sociology has been much-debated (e.g. Becker, 1967; David, 2002). Gilbert (1997: 101) emphasises its ‘honorable history’, particularly Charles Booth’s (1892) pioneering survey of poverty in Victorian London. Advocacy research can identify gaps in knowledge, draw attention to pressing social problems, and result in positive outcomes addressing the said issue (R Best, 2012). Yet it has faced increasing criticism (Gilbert, 1997), not least because the problem being studied is regularly inflated in a way that aligns with the ideological position of the advocate (see J Best, 2012; Weitzer, 2010). While practised by different people and groups, including academics (see Rubin, 2011; Weitzer, 2010), charities regularly fund and produce advocacy research.

Two social trends explain charity advocacy research: the rise of evidence-based policymaking and the changing economic context for charities. Evidence-based policymaking has become a fundamental feature of British social policymaking in the past twenty years. In this paradigm, research is valuable because it provides strategies for ameliorating social problems supposedly free from political ideology. While yielding many benefits, its practice is necessarily complex (Cairney, 2016) and sometimes flawed: some policy-related research is better characterised as policy-based evidence (Sanderson, 2011). Strassheim and Kettunen (2014: 262) describe policy-based evidence as including ‘the failure to include relevant knowledge, the claim of distorted evidence when actually it is not, the interference with research and its opportunistic use, [and] the fabrication, suppression, falsification and instrumentalisation of facts for political purposes'. Policy-based evidence has come under sustained critique, with concern about how it can distort the evidence-base (Clapton, Cree and Smith, 2013; Stevens, 2011); nonetheless, evidence-based policy can still be an effective way to improve social policy (Cairney, 2016; Matthews et al., 2015).

The other key trend is the changing social and economic environment for charities. Charities have shifted from voluntary organizations that relied on altruism and goodwill to effectively operating as businesses in a crowded marketplace where they must compete for funding and public recognition (Hibbert, 1996). Charities have thus more actively courted potential donors and developed strategies to maximise fundraising (Dean and Wood, 2017). Appeals to negative emotions – such as guilt, fear and sadness – are particularly effective in motivating people to donate (Bagozzi and Moore, 1994), especially when coupled with an argument that a donation will help others (Fisher, Vandenbosch and Antia, 2008). There are also increasing accountability demands from donors, who require evidence that the charity to which they donate is both efficient and effective (Iwaarden et al., 2009).

Dean (2015: 144) has described this context as part of a process of 'marketizing community life' (see also Eikenberry, 2009). Here, charities find a tension between the moral work they do as charities and the fundraising work they need to do to survive as organisations. This can result in charities being more overtly engaged in political debates and taking on market-like approaches to please donors and meet financial necessities (Nickel and Eikenberry, 2009). Such market-like strategies include entering partnerships with corporations even if doing so questions their non-profit status and their character and ethos (Beam, 2018; Eikenberry, 2009). Similarly, the increasing use of nongovernmental organisations to provide public goods and services, known as the hollowing out of the state (Milward and Provan, 2010; Rhodes, 1994), further pushes charities toward adopting market-like practices to gain funding from government (Eikenberry, 2009). Charities have also developed close links with the media, and media coverage of their work is one metric by which they are judged by their stakeholders (Jones, 2017). Yet, while research is charting the shifting nature and practices of charities (e.g. Clapton and Cree, 2017; Eikenberry, 2009; Macmillan, 2013; Nelson, 2009), advocacy research by charities remains a neglected area of study.

The Study

Aims, Method and Scope

This study aims to understand the social and political uses of advocacy research, using research reports published by British charities about homophobia in educational settings as a case study. Following the observation that early reports found higher levels of homophobic bullying in schools than any peer-reviewed academic literature on the topic, the discourses of these documents were critically analysed. This requires a constructionist epistemological approach (Schneider, 1985), focusing on the discursive creation, ownership and processing of social problems. As such, any effects the reports might have are not investigated.

The research questions are as follows:

RQ1. What claims-making activities are present in the research reports?

RQ2. Are these studies rigorous compared to peer-reviewed academic research?

RQ3. Is an over-arching master narrative present across the documents?

The sampling strategy was purposive: research publications about homophobia in educational settings from charities in the UK. Reports published in the years 2012-2017[2] were analysed. This included reports on both secondary and tertiary education, as well as those limited to sport in these settings. Reports that focussed on other issues (e.g., on sexual health), or were restricted to a region within the UK, were not included. All reports focussed on sexual minorities' experiences in educational settings. All publications that fit these criteria were included[3]. This resulted in ten publications from four independent charities (Ditch the Label, Metro, the NUS, Stonewall), totalling 375 pages.

Two charities have an explicit focus on sexual minority issues. Stonewall (2019) is the largest Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) rights organisation in Europe and states that its mission is ‘to let all lesbian, gay, bi and trans people, here and abroad, know they're not alone’. Metro (2019) charity was initially called the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre but changed its name and amended its constitution in 2008 ‘to provide services to all people experiencing issues related to sexuality, identity, gender and diversity’. The other two charities have broader foci: *Ditch the Label* (2019) is an ‘international anti-bullying charity’ that seeks a ‘world that is fair, equal and free from all types of bullying’ while the NUS (2019) is a charity that ‘represents the interest of students across the UK’.

All reports are classified as research by the charities: for example, the Annual Bullying Surveys can be found in the ‘research papers’ section of Ditch the Label’s website and the NUS reports are in the ‘research publication’ section of their website. All reports are regularly described as ‘research’ or ‘research study’ in their text. Table 1 provides details of the ten reports. Given the close analysis undertaken, this provided both a substantial data set and sufficient scope to develop meaningful arguments about these documents.

Insert Table 1 here

Themes and Reflexivity

The research hypotheses are addressed through a critical thematic analysis of the data (see Bacchi, 2009). The analytical codes were *claims-making*, *rigour* and *cultural trauma process*. These were selected because they are identified in the social problems literature as important mechanisms in establishing cultural recognition of social problems (e.g. Alexander, 2012;

Best, 1990; Clapton and Cree, 2017). In the following sub-sections, I explain the rationale for deciding upon codes and the resultant themes.

Claims-Making

Social problems theory holds that conditions must be brought to people's attention to be classed as social problems (Schneider, 1985). People 'make claims arguing that particular conditions are social problems, and others respond to those claims' (Best, 1990: 11)—a process known as *claims-making.* While claims-making can be done by individuals, it is often charities that 'assume a prominent role, often linked to a call for funding to unearth the full scale of a problem and support those affected' (Clapton et al., 2013: 10). In their research on claims-making activities of Child Protection agencies, Clapton and Cree (2017) highlight three core questions that should be asked of documents that make claims about social problems: 1. Who is speaking and to whom? Who is the audience? 2. What is said, and not said? 3. How is it said? These questions were used as initial codes related to claims-making. Further analysis, engaged with existing literature, resulted in the themes: speaker and audience; self-referencing; and domain expansion.

Rigour

The social problems literature demonstrates that statistics cited by claims-makers are often based on little evidence or flawed research (Best, 1990; Rubin, 2011). Joel Best (2012) argues that advocacy research tends to be designed to minimise false negatives (i.e., to avoid incorrectly identifying something as *not* part of the problem when it actually is) because advocates want to draw attention to a social condition that they believe to be neglected in society. Yet a common by-product of producing the fewest false negatives is to increase false positives (J Best, 2012; Gilbert, 1997), artificially inflating the scale and scope of the problem and undermining the generalizability of the research. As such, it is important to investigate the methodological and analytical rigour of the reports and how they compare with peer-reviewed social science research.

Cultural Trauma Process

Experiences of homophobic bullying can be considered a form of trauma (Monk, 2011). However, social processes determine what traumatic experiences are recognised at the societal level (Alexander, 2004). Distinguishing between individual traumatic experiences and cultural recognition of trauma, Alexander (2004: 10) writes, 'Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity'. Alexander (2012) argues that a trauma process exists by which an issue becomes recognised as a cultural trauma. For societal recognition of a cultural trauma, claims-makers must develop a master narrative about the issue. This master narrative must say something about: 1) the nature of the pain; 2) the nature of the victim; 3) the relation of the victim to the wider audience; and 4) the attribution of wider responsibility (Alexander, 2012). These four components were used as analytic codes to see if the research reports are part of a trauma process.

Reflexivity

Standard processes of reflexivity ensured rigour throughout the analysis (Dean, 2017). This included inter-rater reliability, with an additional two academics independently coding two reports each using the codes identified by the author. Differences in analysis were then discussed and the analysis refined until there was agreement. While this is still an interpretive framework, it guards against subjectivity and bias impacting upon the findings. Peer review of drafts of the article was also obtained from several academics with expertise in sexualities, social policy and education, who acted as 'critical friends' and gave extensive feedback.

Results: Claims-making

Speaker and audience

All research reports start with an executive summary or introduction that provides an overview of the context, findings and implications from the research report. The three *Annual Bullying Survey* reports from Ditch the Label open with an executive summary by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or Managing Director, both of whom are labelled as founders of the charity. The NUS *Out in Sport* report has a Foreword by the then Vice-Chancellor of the University of East London; while the three reports by Stonewall have executive summaries from the CEO. The use of official posts is strategic as they can be seen to add authority and gravitas to a report (Clapton and Cree, 2017).

Three reports do not have a high-profile person writing their summary. The NUS report, *Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow*, has an Introduction written by two named NUS LGBT Officers—a signal of authenticity given the student-focus of the NUS. Similarly, the NUS report, *Pride and Prejudice in Education*, has four forewords and a preface from NUS LGBT+ officers and related people working in the charity sector. The Metro report, *Youth Chances*, does not attribute authorship in its Introduction, but rather uses the pronoun 'we' throughout. Non-attribution positions the organization as the author, signalling the authority of that institution.

The reports do not explicitly identify an imagined reader. However, a policy-oriented audience is imagined through the discussion of recommendations for particular groups. In each case, the core referenced constituent is closely associated to the aims of the charity. The three NUS reports direct their recommendations toward Students Unions and Further and

Higher Education providers; Ditch the Label's *Annual Bullying Surveys* focus on managers within schools and colleges; *Youth Chances* is aimed at 'commissioners' and 'providers'. The Stonewall reports contain recommendations aimed at several people and groups related to its charitable focus.

The reports also have an intended audience beyond social policy stakeholders. They are written accessibly, with carefully designed layouts that include stand-out quotes, large text for key findings, and generous use of images. This format suggests an intended readership of news journalists and the broader media. While it is beyond the scope of this study to systematically document engagement with the media, it is notable that most of the reports received substantial media attention at the time of publication. This was actively sought by at least some of the charities. For example, Stonewall and the NUS released press releases regarding their reports (e.g. NUS, 2014; Stonewall, 2017) and engaged in media appearances at the time. Engagement with the media is a vital part of a claims-making process (J Best, 2012), and claims-makers often use the media to advance their argument (Clapton and Cree, 2017). The presentation of the reports and the media engagement at the time of publication are evidence that the media is an important audience of the reports.

Domain Expansion

Domain expansion is a process of claims-making in which an initial problem is expanded to a broader set of issues. Best (1990: 65) highlights that it 'help[s] keep the issue fresh and newsworthy, thereby holding the attention of the media and the public'. He argues that it can be easier to expand an already recognised social problem than gain recognition for a new one. Domain expansion is evident in the reports from the three charities that published more than one report.

The Ditch the Label reports made recommendations to a broader group of people each year: from administrators or managers within schools and colleges in 2013 to administrators, managers, parents, safeguarding professionals, young people and the Government by the 2015 report. The NUS reports expanded their focus by concentrating on sport in Further and Higher Education in 2012, LGBT students' experiences in 2014, and their third report in 2016 describes its remit as 'an exploration of experiences and perceptions of sexual orientation and gender identity among post-school education learners and staff'. As such, the research scope moved from a smaller area generally deemed to be more homophobic than broader society to one deemed to be more inclusive than broader society. For Stonewall, domain expansion is evident in how the recommendations increase in number and scope across each report. This increase of recommendations expands the domain of the problem across schools, and, as stated in the 2017 report, contends that challenging homophobia is the responsibility of all school members.

Self-Referencing

All reports regularly engaged in self-referencing. The most obvious form was discussing the charity that published the report. In all cases, the aims of the associated charity are discussed explicitly: early in the document, at the end, or both. The Stonewall reports contain the most extensive discussion of the associated charity, including its aims, available resources and broader charitable work. More significantly, all reports lay claim to the expertise of the associated charities and groups. For example, the *Annual Bullying Surveys* regularly discuss the importance and expert knowledge of Ditch the Label throughout the reports. *Youth Chances* discusses the importance of Metro. The NUS reports contain the fewest claims to expertise, but still reference their NUS LGBT campaign. The process of making claims to expertise within the research reports while not discussing expertise of other relevant charities serves to advertise the funding charity while not drawing attention to other, competitor, charities.

The reports also reference their own or each other's reports while having very little engagement with peer-reviewed academic research. This process excludes conflicting information and keeps the findings clear and unambiguous (Stevens, 2011). The Stonewall reports provide the most extensive self-referencing, focusing on other Stonewall reports. While *The School Report* 2012 cites some other charity reports (the NSPCC and National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence), it relies on its 2007 version of *The School Report*, even making claims of trends between the two data sets. *The Teachers' Report* and *School Report* (2017) only cite Stonewall reports: none cites any peer-reviewed academic research. *Youth Chances* cites reports by Stonewall, the NSPCC, Public Health England, the YMCA and the NHS. It also cites two academic articles.

The NUS reports cite other similar reports. *Out in Sport* discusses Stonewall's 2012 *The School Report*, as well reports from Sport England, the Rugby Football League and the Equalities Office; *Pride and Prejudice in Education* cites NUS reports and other related publications, such as from the Equality Challenge Unit and Skills Funding Agency; *Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow* also cites Stonewall and other charity reports. Importantly, this NUS report was the only one to contextualise findings in academic literature. However, it contains a literature review that includes limited academic research and incorrectly states that 'Academic work on LGBT [sic] starts in the late 1980s with deconstructionist and post-structuralist theories' (12).

This self-referencing and tendency to exclude academic peer-reviewed research is a mechanism to legitimise the reports. Self-referencing alongside claims to expertise in providing interventions are ways of claiming authority in the area (Best, 1987; Clapton and Cree, 2017). Such processes have been described as 'institutional self-preservation'

(Gusfield, 1989: 436) in how they position the charity associated with the report as an important actor in tackling the social issue. Furthermore, the exclusion of academic research means that the reports do not have to discuss empirical findings that contradict their own results (for example, on whether LGBT youth are necessarily at risk, discussed below)—a simplification often found in policy-based evidence (Stevens, 2011; Strassheim and Kettunen, 2014).

Rigour of Research

Advocacy research has faced significant critique for a lack of methodological and analytical rigour (e.g. Gilbert, 1997; McLaughlin, 2015; Weitzer, 2010). A key issue is that the reports provide insufficient information about methods to allow assessment of validity and reliability: Providing short and incomplete discussions of the methods adopted prevents the research reports being properly scrutinised. In six reports, the discussion of methods is limited to one or two paragraphs, ranging from 84 words (*Youth Chances*) to 168 words (*Annual Bullying Survey* 2013). Methods are discussed in a little more detail (343 words) in *The School Report* (2012). The NUS reports provide the most detail regarding methods, including an Appendix for *Out in Sport* detailing respondent demographics. Indeed, a conflation of methodology with demographics is apparent, with all but *The Teachers' Report* providing charts and graphs of participant information as the main content of the methods section.

Unlike the diversity of methods in academic research, all reports use an online survey as the primary method of data collection. For nine of the reports, this was the sole form of data collection. *Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow* also draws on case studies from participating universities and an online focus group. Although a convenient way to gather large quantities of data, online surveys are susceptible to a range of methodological problems including high attrition rates and non-random sampling (Riggle, Rostosky and Reedy, 2005). Significant concerns have been raised about surveys in sexuality research, particularly that online surveys as a method are likely to increase the number of false positive reports (see Savin-Williams and Joyner, 2014).

The recruitment of participants for these surveys was also flawed and went against best practice guidelines (Durso and Gates, 2013). Seven out of nine surveys which recruited on social media had no controls for who could participate (*Annual Bullying Survey* 2014 and 2015 had controls on participation); yet validity screening has been shown to be an important check for surveys with adolescent respondents, with a lack of screening producing 'an elevation in otherwise low base rate behaviors' (Cornell et al., 2012: 21). Furthermore, the reports use convenience sampling by targeting LGBT groups and networks, except for the three *Annual Bullying Surveys*, which also examine bullying experiences of heterosexual youth. The NUS reports recruited participants through activist networks and sexualities events. The Stonewall reports do not discuss recruitment but Stonewall stated in personal correspondence that it was through convenience sampling, including LGBT groups and social media. This approach is biased toward those who strongly identify with LGBT labels. These limitations mean that any claims about the experiences of LGBT youth cannot be generalised beyond the reports' samples (Cimpian, 2017; McCormack, 2014).

The reports also utilise small samples to make generalised claims. While five surveys have good or respectable numbers of LGBT participants (*Youth Chances*, n = 5,558; *School Report* 2017, n = 3713; *Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow*, n = 2,162; *The School Report* 2012, n = 1,404; *Out in Sport*, n = 746), five reports have fewer than 220 young LGBT respondents. *Pride and Prejudice in Education* has 167 LGBT student respondents. Ditch the Label's surveys contain small numbers of LGBT respondents (2013, n=199; 2014, n=217; 2015, n=211). Particularly concerning, it presents findings for lesbians, gays and bisexuals separately despite very small numbers (e.g., for gay respondents, n=55 in 2013; n=36 in 2014; and n=30 in 2015). While statistical techniques can deal with small sample sizes, very small shifts in respondent data can look huge in proportional terms, meaning that high variance in results would be expected if the studies were repeated (Durso and Gates, 2013). The likelihood of such shifts is increased given the non-random sampling procedures.

The selective use of quotes emphasises the worst experiences of respondents in an emotive and unrepresentative manner (Best, 1990). For example, in *The School Report* (2012), the quotes given to support statements in the report are frequently exemplars of the worst case. So, when the report claims that ‘more than half of lesbian, gay and bisexual students…experience homophobic bullying’, the accompanying quote refers to a death threat where someone threatened to ‘shove a knife up my arse and in my throat’ (2). These quotes are often written in large colourful text, drawing attention to these worst-case examples. This corresponds with research on social problems, which critiques studies that manipulate numbers by using broad definitions of issues and then illustrate these definitions with quotes about the most horrific examples, even though these examples represent the smallest number of cases within the definition (Rubin, 2011).

Finally, while universities require ethical approval for empirical research, and research publications must discuss ethical processes, none of the reports discusses ethics in any form. None mentions gaining ethical approval and none mentions any procedures used to safeguard participants or ensure their identities are protected. This is despite many of the studies asking children as young as 12 to recount potentially traumatic experiences, including physical violence and rape, in an anonymous survey format.

Developing a Trauma Narrative

Cultural trauma is an influential sociological theory that contends that trauma is not just an individual experience, but a collective one with attendant social processes (Alexander, 2012). Analysing the reports across these themes, it is evident that, collectively, the reports constitute an attempt to develop a trauma narrative about homophobic bullying in society.

The Nature of the Pain

There is unanimity across reports of the nature of the harm done to LGBT young people in education: most conceptualise this through the term homophobic bullying. For example, homophobic bullying is a key term in all Stonewall reports, and all three Ditch the Label reports focus on homophobic bullying as the issue for LGBT youth. The Metro report does not emphasise the term homophobic bullying, but describes 'high levels of discrimination, abuse and mental health issues' (2). It also cites Stonewall statistics for homophobic bullying and concurs with the arguments about the nature of the pain.

The description of the nature of the pain is similar across reports. *The School Report* (2012: 7) states that homophobic bullying includes verbal abuse, being 'gossiped about', ostracizing, cyberbullying, physical abuse, death threats and being threatened with a weapon; *The Teacher's Report* adopts similar definitions, as do the three *Annual Bullying Surveys*, stating in 2013 that it includes verbal, physical and cyber-bullying, alongside sexual harassment. In 2015, this is expanded to include sexual assault, social exclusion, extortion and indirect bullying. No report provided a discordant definition.

The reports also discuss the effects of homophobic bullying. For example, in Section 7, *The School Report* (2012) documents reported negative effects which are assumed to be a direct result of homophobic bullying, including: absenteeism, poorer mental health, lower aspirations, and self-harm. *Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow* also discusses 'detrimental effects on retention and student well-being' (26). The *Annual Bullying Survey*

(2014: 6) reports ‘extreme impact’, stating that those who experience bullying are more likely to self-harm, have suicide ideation, or even kill themselves ‘as a direct result of bullying’ (18). Two reports found less significant effects relating to the nature of the pain. *Out in Sport* focused more on LGBT students feeling ‘uncomfortable engaging in sport for a variety of cultural, structural, and other reasons’ (3). Similarly, *Youth Chances* found ‘little difference in overall levels of physical and sexual health’ (10). However, both reports still frame homophobic bullying as a serious issue requiring immediate action from stakeholders. As such, there is agreement across reports that the nature of the pain is homophobic bullying and associated behaviours that have negative effects.

None of the reports discusses the significant effects of homophobia on heterosexual youth (Plummer, 1999), nor do they focus on sex education or discussion of sexuality in primary schools—both contentious issues in the media. This is noteworthy because homophobic bullying is a problem where there is already significant policy support: schools are now compelled to include sexuality in their anti-bullying and equal opportunity policies. A focus on bullying has been critiqued for being too narrow to counter homophobia in schools (Formby, 2015). Thus, the homogeneity in the reports regarding the nature of the pain does not reflect the diversity of perspectives in the academic literature.

The Nature of the Victim

Social science research has argued against assuming LGBT youth to be victims or inherently at risk (e.g. Savin-Williams, 2005). Noteworthy, then, is the presentation of LGBT youth as victims in the reports. This is most explicit in the three *Annual Bullying Surveys*, which explicitly label LGBT youth as a ‘vulnerable group’ (2013: 20), the ‘most bullied demographic group’ (2014: 24) and that ‘*all those* who deviate, or are perceived to deviate away from heterosexuality, are significantly more likely to experience bullying’ (2015: 16, emphasis added). These claims are questionable, particularly when compared to other groups that face discrimination such as, for example, school children with disabilities and ethnic minority students. The other reports do not set LGBT people out as a separate group, rather referring to them as being the same as any other student apart from the bullying and harassment they receive because of their sexuality. Other than the NUS reports, which contend university experiences are more exclusive than school ones, the discourse in these reports are that LGBT youth are victims of bullying and harassment.

The terminology to describe 'the victim' is also relevant. Seven reports always refer to LGBT youth as 'young people' (*Youth Chances*, the Stonewall reports and the *Annual Bullying Surveys*). The NUS reports are more diverse, with *Out in Sport* using the terms 'young LGBT people', 'young men' and 'LGBT students' and *Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow* primarily using 'young people', alongside 'LGBT students' and 'LGBT pupils'; *Pride and Prejudice in Education* uses the terms learner, student and teacher with a relevant prefix (LGB+, heterosexual etc). The three reports that refer to 'young LGBT people' have a sample that consisted of university students only.

The similarity across reports is notable, particularly given the diverse use of terms to discuss young people in the academic literature. Important here is the symbolic meaning associated with the term 'young people' (Loseke and Best, 2003). The word 'young' denotes a group of people in society that deserve extra support because of their innocence (Best, 1990)—referring to participants as teenagers would signify something different. Framing sexual minority youth as ordinary young people makes it easier to view them as victims of traumatic experience.

Relation of the victim to the audience

There was great similarity in how the reports relate the experiences of LGBT youth to the readers of the reports. The naming of LGBT youth as 'young people', or as different only because of being bullied, suggests that LGBT people are part of the same group as the audience. Some reports also emphasise notions of equal rights: *Out in Sport* argues that LGBT people have the same rights to participate in sports as others. The *Annual Bullying Survey* (2014) identifies many employers of the associated charity *Ditch the Label* as victims of bullying, and thus the same as the victims. The simple equating of LGBT youth as no different from other people is a key way of establishing a trauma narrative. As Alexander (2012: 19) argues, 'only if the victims are represented in terms of valued qualities shared by the larger collective identity will the audience be able to symbolically participate in the experience of the originating trauma'.

Attribution of Responsibility

While Alexander (2012) refers to the attribution of responsibility in the trauma process as determining who should be blamed for the traumatic event, the reports focus on actions by institutions and stakeholders that will combat homophobia. In *The School Report* (2012: 1), the then CEO placed the onus on educational institutions, writing: 'it's critical that all the key players – from the Department for Education, to academy chains, to individual schools – don't lose sight of their own role in tackling homophobic bullying'. This is mirrored in *Youth Chances*, which states that 'there is little evidence of local service commissioning for the specific needs of LGBTQ young people'. Not all reports explicitly identify who is to blame for homophobic bullying in school cultures, but there is an implicit argument across all reports that people in a position to challenge such behaviours and improve institutional environments are at least in part responsible.

Discussion

This article critically analysed ten reports about homophobia in educational contexts, written and funded by British charities, as a case study of contemporary advocacy research. The reports all claim that they are presenting objective research about a pressing social problem—homophobia in education. Through domain expansion and self-referencing, the reports lay claim to the associated charities being experts best-placed to address the issue because of their advocacy work as a charity. The reports are near-unanimous in how they circumscribe the problem as being the homophobic bullying of LGBT youth. However, significant flaws in the rigour of the research in the reports exists, in both methods and analysis. Overly-generalized claims were then made and, through selective presentation of quotes, presented to maximise impact of the findings of harm. Adopting a social problems approach to critically analyse the reports, it is evident that they engage in a trauma process to create a master narrative about homophobic bullying in educational settings: where homophobic bullying is the trauma for LGBT young people, with schools and stakeholders responsible for addressing the pain and resolving the issue.

It is necessary to consider the evidence-based policy paradigm and the competitive marketized environment for charities in order to understand these reports. Regarding the former, the homogeneity of the reports is explained by the type of evidence that is valued in the evidence-based policy paradigm. There has been a shift within government policy-making where the traditional Weberian bureaucrat has been replaced by an entrepreneurial figure who values evidence when it supports a policy goal and rejects it when it provides nuance or complexity (Cairney, 2016). In an ethnography of the civil service, Stevens (2011) shows how evidence needs to provide certainty to persuade governments to adopt new policies and methodological rigour can be sacrificed in order to produce such apparent certainty. The current study has shown that the charity reports fail to include relevant academic research, use their findings in opportunistic ways, and advance a trauma narrative that is a form of political action (see Strassheim and Kettunen, 2014). As such, they should be considered a form of policy-based evidence rather than rigorous research that contributes to understanding the social world.

This policy-based evidence approach connects with the increasingly marketized arena in which charities operate (Eikenberry, 2009; Nickel and Eikenberry, 2009). Here, the methodological and analytical flaws of the reports make them more attractive forms of evidence for the media, social policymakers and those who allocate government funding. Notably, some of the government press releases about increased funding for challenging homophobic bullying cite these reports but do not cite academic research (DfE, 2015). The funding in these six years allocated by the government, in a broader context of austerity, has totalled six million pounds and the government allocated a further 4.5 million pounds in this area in its LGBT Action Plan (GEO, 2018). In a context where charities can bid for government funding to provide public goods and services (Eikenberry, 2009), the reports can be used as evidence to demonstrate the respective charities are expert in the topic under consideration.

The reports are also designed to appeal to the media and are written in a way to match journalists' needs for information to report as news—something Fenton (2009) calls 'news cloning'. The reports are in an accessible format with clear, unambiguous findings that can be easily reported, particularly given the use of press releases at the time of publication (Clapton and Cree, 2017). In a context where the news gathering resources of journalists have declined (Davis, 2003), the reports and accompanying press releases are effective ways of gaining media coverage and controlling the likely form that coverage will take (see also Clapton and Cree, 2017).

Recommendations from this study are that charities that produce advocacy research in the future should: 1) provide detailed description of methods, including sampling procedure, limitations and how surveys have been piloted; 2) explicitly discuss ethical procedures and disclose conflicts of interest; 3) engage with academic research and not just other charity reports; and 4) use a range of data collection methods that account for potential false positive results as well as false negative ones. For researchers, policymakers and journalists reading these reports, it is important to: 1) scrutinise the methods used; 2) be wary of headline statistics and check sample sizes; 3) read the reports rather than press releases and media coverage of them; and 4) examine for any conflicts of interest with the charities involved. These reports are not credible evidence regarding prevalence of homophobia in educational settings and should not be cited by academics as evidence for these claims.

There are limitations to this study. While all research reports that fit the criteria were analysed, the scope of this study is limited to issues of homophobia in educational contexts. Importantly, only two of the charities focus on sexualities issues, suggesting that this is not restricted to one sub-section of the charity sector. Even so, further study of advocacy research is needed to understand its influence and reach. Qualitative research with the charities could further illuminate the rationales for these reports, and interviews with policymakers could examine their influence. Similarly, a study of media engagement with and reporting on advocacy research would advance the field.

In summary, this article has provided the first examination of research reports on homophobia in education settings that are written and funded by charities to examine the status of advocacy research. Influential in the media, social policy and academia, the reports have significant methodological and analytical flaws which mean they are better classed as campaigning documents despite purporting to be rigorous research. Given this, it is incumbent upon academics, journalists and social policymakers to treat these reports sceptically and investigate the role of advocacy research more generally.

Notes

1. The Metro received funding from the Big Lottery Fund and had an 'Expert Panel' which included academics, yet the charity retained control over all aspects of the report.

2. 2012 was chosen because this year marked the publication of several reports following the original 2007 Stonewall report. 2017 was the final year to allow comparison between the 2012 and 2017 Stonewall reports.

3. The Annual Bullying Surveys in 2016 and 2017 did not discuss sexuality in the main body of text so were not included.

4. Figures are calculated by multiplying percentage of LGBT students by sample size.

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Table 1: The research reports

Report Title	Associated Charity	Year	Pages	Survey Size	LGBT participants[4]
Annual Bullying Survey	Ditch the Label	2013	22	1,843 students	199
Annual Bullying Survey	Ditch the Label	2014	30	3,616 students	217
Annual Bullying Survey	Ditch the Label	2015	46	3,023 students	211
Education Beyond the Straight and Narrow	NUS	2014	56	4,240 students	2,162
Out in Sport	NUS	2012	40	845 students	746
Pride and Prejudice in Education	NUS	2016	44	1,505 staff and students	167
The School Report	Stonewall	2012	35	1,614 students	Not possible to determine
The Teachers' Report	Stonewall	2014	44	1,832 teachers	n/a
School Report	Stonewall	2017	44	3,713 students	3,416
Youth Chances	Metro	2014	14	7,126 students	5,588